

June 20, 2008: Commissioner Shea Briefs Congressional Staff on China

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WASHINGTON--Commissioner Nina Shea of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom discussed religious freedom violations in China at a briefing sponsored by the Congressional Task Force on International Religious Freedom entitled, "Religious Freedom in China: Analyzing the Impact of the Olympics' Role in Shaping Bilateral and Multilateral Efforts to Bring About a Peaceful Democratic Transition."

In order to raise the profile of religious freedom and related human rights in China via the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, the Commission has urged the U.S. Congress to allocate sufficient resources within funds appropriated for the security of U.S. citizens during the Beijing Games to ensure that training and related information materials include content that:

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instructs security officials, Olympic spectators, and athletes on China's commitments to uphold for all visitors certain internationally recognized human rights standards during the Olympic Games; and

- informs U.S. citizens, participants, and spectators at the Olympic

games of their rights under international law; identifies problem areas individuals may encounter with Chinese authorities relating to the freedoms of expression, religion or belief, assembly, and association; and includes information on Chinese law and recent human rights practices of the Chinese government.

"China was awarded the privilege of hosting the Olympics with the expectation that its repressive policies would improve. That has not happened. Now, the international community must say clearly to the Chinese government that the continued repression of the religious freedom of its own people only hurts China's international prestige, harms U.S.-China relations, and violates China's international obligations. Hopefully, China will realize that protecting religious freedom and related human rights is not only the right thing to do, it also serves China's own interests," Shea said.

The off-the-record briefing was chaired by Rep. Trent Franks (R-AZ) and included the participation of Regina Kidder, a human rights activist for the rights of the Uyghur people in East Turkestan; Bob Fu, President of China Aid Association; and Todd Stein, Director of Government Relations at the International Campaign for Tibet.

The full text of Commissioner Shea's remarks is below:

Commissioner Nina Shea Addresses Religious Freedom Abuses in China

Task Force for International Religious Freedom Briefing

June 20, 2008

I would like to thank the Congressional Task Force for International Religious Freedom for holding this briefing on the impact of the Olympics on the Chinese government's treatment of religious communities and for inviting the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to participate.

The world looks to the Olympic Games as an event that compels closed, authoritarian countries to open up. There's always the hope that the openness will then have a lasting, positive impact on those countries long after the last athlete and fans have returned home, after the television lights have been turned off, and after the press centers have closed down.

Yet in China, we've seen much the opposite. Instead of improvements in conditions for religious freedom and other human rights, we've seen broad efforts to crack down on and control religious activity.

In the past year, we've seen the continued detention of Uighur Muslim clerics for so-called "illegal" religious activities and the official insistence that these clerics undergo annual "political training" seminars. We've seen a so-called "strike-hard" campaign by the Ministry of Public Security ordering crackdowns on unregistered Protestant house churches and so-called "illegal cults." And we've also seen a renewed government practice of collecting personal information on Falun Gong practitioners, Evangelical Protestants, and others who practice their religion outside the confines of state-allied institutions. We've also seen the brutal government crackdown on Tibetan monks.

Some of these efforts clearly have been tied to the preparations for the Olympics, not least because government and state-allied religious officials fear that contact with foreign co-religionists could encourage a flowering of religious practice that is not sanctioned or controlled by the state.

China is clearly pursuing policies against religious freedom that violate international human rights standards. Can Chinese officials not be aware of how damaging that is to China's international prestige?

Religious communities are growing rapidly in China and the freedom to participate in officially sanctioned religious activity has increased in many areas of the country over the past year.

High-ranking Chinese government officials, including President Hu Jintao, have praised the positive role of religious communities in China and articulated a desire to have religious groups promote "economic and social development."

Yet despite being awarded the Olympics, China remains one of the world's worst religious freedom violators. Although there is a growing "zone of toleration" for the worship and of China's religious communities, the government continues to restrict religious practice to government-approved religious associations, control the activities of both unregistered religious groups and spiritual movements (such as the Falun Gong) and repress the religious activities of ethnic minority groups viewed as a "security" threat-such as the Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims.

China continues to arrest, detain, and harass religious believers. Protestants and Catholics who refuse to register with the government sanctioned religious groups face particularly serious penalties. Last year, over 600 Protestants were detained and 38 were given sentences of over one year.

Thirty-three unregistered Catholic bishops and priests remain in prison or some sort of administrative detention. Catholic Bishop Su Zhermin, arrested in the late 1990s, has disappeared, despite repeated requests to visit him and gain his release.

Despite Pope Benedict's eloquent appeal for unity, Beijing-Vatican relations remain deadlocked, with the Chinese government occasionally ordaining bishops and priests without prior approved of the Holy See.

It is impossible to get an accurate figure on the numbers of detained Falun Gong, Tibetan Buddhists, and Uighur Muslims-but some reports indicate there are hundreds. This includes the Dalai Lama's chosen Panchen Lama, a boy who was detained at age six and turned 19 this year.

And these are only the arrests. China's other abuses also violate international human rights standards include: requiring communist ideology training for Muslim imams and Tibetan monks; the demolition of Buddhist, Muslim, and Protestant religious structures; the confiscation of religious materials; and the harassment and arrest of lawyers assisting imprisoned religious leaders.

The unrest in Tibet last March highlights again that China's policies of repression and control have failed. Tibetans want religious freedom without restrictions. They want to choose their own religious leaders without interference. They want to be free to venerate the Dalai Lama without fear of arrest. These were the key demands of peacefully protesting monks.

The Commission has called for investigations into the violence in Tibetan areas. We have also urged President Bush to cancel his attendance at the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Beijing unless there is substantial improvement in respecting Tibetans' religious freedom, including the opening of direct and concrete talks with the Dalai Lama.

If President Bush does attend the opening ceremony, the Commission has recommended that he first visit the Tibetan regional capital, Lhasa, or another Tibetan area, and make a public statement affirming the U.S. commitment to religious freedom for Tibetans, as well as for China's other growing religious communities.

President Bush has pledged that while attending the Summer Olympic Games in China, he will raise concerns about freedom of religion in China with President Hu Jintao. The Commission has urged the president to request to meet with prisoners and persons detained by the state because of their exercise of freedom of religion or advocacy of this and related human rights and to attend an unregistered church-underlining the Chinese government's violations of religious freedom by its efforts to control religious practice.

In order to raise the profile of religious freedom and related human rights promotion through the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, the Commission has urged the U.S. Congress to allocate sufficient resources within funds appropriated for the security of U.S. citizens in Beijing during the Games to ensure that training and related information materials include content that:

- instructs security officials, Olympic spectators, and athletes on China's commitments to uphold for all visitors certain internationally recognized human rights standards during the Olympic Games; and
- informs U.S. citizens, participants, and spectators at the Olympic games of their rights, protected under international law, and identifies problem areas they may encounter with Chinese authorities relating to the freedoms of expression, religion or belief, assembly, and association, including information on Chinese law and the recent human rights practices of the Chinese government.

The U.S. government should also designate appropriate funding to independent human rights organizations to monitor and report on human rights conditions during the Games to ensure that the Chinese government is in compliance with commitments made to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to

uphold human rights and international standards during the Olympics, in concert with the principles of the IOC and the standards of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

China was awarded the Olympics with the expectation that its repressive policies would improve.

That has not happened. Now, the international community must say clearly to the Chinese government that the continued repression of the religious freedom of its own people only hurts China's international prestige, harms U.S.-China relations, and violates China's international obligations.

Hopefully, China will come to realize that protecting religious freedom and related human rights is not only the right thing to do it also serves its own interests.